

ALEWIFE

(Alosa pseudoharengus)

Oneida Lake Status:
Rare



Alewife (Alosa pseudoharengus)
Wisconsin Sea Grant



Close up of an alewife's head
Jim Negus



Close up of a gizzard shad's head
Jim Negus

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Edited June 2013

- Observed in Oneida Lake since 1916
- Similar in appearance to gizzard shad
- Important prey fish in nearby Lake Ontario

Alewife are native to Atlantic coast drainages but likely did not use canals to disperse into lakes of central New York, including Oneida Lake. They have been observed in Oneida Lake since 1916, but they have never been abundant.

Researchers suggest that the alewife population arose historically from stocked populations although it is possible alewife migrated upland to the lake through the Oswego-Oneida River system.



A juvenile alewife
Jim Negus

In contrast, in nearby Lake Ontario, alewife were historically very abundant, and massive dieoffs occurred in the 1960s. By 1982, Chinook salmon became the principal predator of alewife, leading to the development of a multi-million dollar recreational sport fishery.

Alewife are a silvery color with greenish backs. They have large eyes and a dark spot just behind the gill opening. They resemble gizzard shad but differ in that they have upturned mouths (photos at left) and lack a long ray on their dorsal fins (see gizzard shad fact sheet). Adult alewife are usually about 6 inches long but can grow to 10 inches. Their lifespan is 6 or 7 years. Alewife are also called "sawbellies" because of the small serrations present along their undersides. Zooplankton are their preferred prey, but they may also consume small fish and fish eggs.